



UNCLASSIFIED 9416142
United States Department of State

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Washington, D. C. 20520
July 9, 1994

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DECL: OADR
INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

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TO: The Acting Secretary

FROM: INR - Toby T. Gati

SUBJECT: The French in Rwanda

RELEASED IN FULL

France's Operation Turquoise in Rwanda is a humanitarian gesture, late and hastily organized, but with the goal nonetheless of saving lives and creating the climate for restoration of civil order. After evacuating French nationals at the onset of Rwanda's breakdown, the French watched the killing in horror, but with no obvious intention of becoming re-engaged. Bosnia, where 6000 French soldiers serve in UNPROFOR, absorbed most of its attention. Algeria, a ticking time-bomb in the French consciousness, seemed the next potential crisis.

As the killing of Tutsis continued, the French media made Rwanda a political issue by playing on traditional French ties with Francophone Africa, guilt over earlier French involvement in Rwanda which left the government forces well-armed, and passivity as the genocide continued. Precisely what triggered the decision to intervene is unclear, but the decision seems to have been made suddenly, only a few days, if not hours, before the June 15 announcement.

France took a leadership role, while the rest of the world waited, and has been disappointed by the lukewarm support from the international community. Paris must have known its action would revive fears about French interventionist designs, as indeed it has. The permanent French objective of maximizing influence in Francophone Africa and desire to be perceived as a great power probably contributed to the decision. A genuine desire to ameliorate Rwanda's tragedy -- fueled by media and public opinion -- was also a key factor. French declarations of humanitarian aims and of having reluctantly shouldered a burden are no doubt sincere. In any case, despite the apparent success of the operation, distrust of French motives has neutralized any hopes the French might have had for playing a leading role in Rwandan politics. With its self-imposed July 29 deadline, France's top priorities are to declare victory, extricate its forces safely, and turn the operation over to an expanded UNAMIR as quickly as possible.

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File Name: 0707memofrrw

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